

Gaffa, 25 October 2011



A completely unique theatre performance about Music, Manga and Machines - and War.

by Morten Gottschalck

It's 7.30pm at Odense Theatre. The concert reviewer - the impostor - sits up in the balcony looking down at a lone woman dressed in yellow who walks onto the stage and begins the performance *War Sum Up* with a music-box and a clear, light, vocal.

I am at the theatre. Theatre is not for everyone. Good theatre has a different emotional impact than a pop concert. And just as people appreciate Picasso and Monet more if they are trained in the visual arts, it helps at a theatrical performance if you can grasp the symbolism. In *War Sum Up* symbolism actually comprises most of the action - in completely the right way.

Tightly constructed and rich

War Sum Up is an untraditional piece of theatre, based on a Japanese theme. The actors could have been taken from the feudal period in Japan, have been dipped in a little manga (the distinctive Japanese style of cartoon strips) and then come out onto the stage. The entire text is sung in a Japanese drone, which means that most people have to decipher everything via the small overtitle screen above the stage.

The story gravitates round the human condition of three types: the soldier, the warrior and the spy. The figures remain nameless and relatively non-concrete, but we see how each separately takes part in the war. During the battle they are blinded by tears and slowly but surely are turned into machines that carry out the work that has to be done. In the background, images are also shown of people who themselves gradually turned into machines. The critique is obvious.

Sound and image in a wonderful symbiosis

The entire visual background to the performance is made up of fine-meshed nets stretch from floor to ceiling - too fine for the audience to be able to see them, but just coarse enough to be able to reflect the images from a number of hidden projectors. At times, the background moves slowly across the stage; at other times, individual sections of the stage are encapsulated in a particular light, or drawings underpin the action. It all seems incredibly successful and well-controlled, and it also keeps the performance alive, even at moments when the Japanese soprano (plus samples) become a trifle too overheated. I really must single out the music - written by the British band The Irrepressibles - throughout, though particularly in the third story of the spy, where the female

vocalist moves around like a robot, delighting in her own (medicated?) self-perception as a super-woman.

It would be impossible to remove any of the three bearing elements of the performance - song, images or symbolism - and still achieve the same result. The balance and harmony is extremely fine-grained and effective. As an entirety the performance works incredibly well, and I would recommend it to anyone who can maintain their attention for 80 minutes. I had to hold back a tear at the end of the performance - and that is my personal quality assurance.

A few small blemishes

A few small criticisms must also be made: The sound was a bit too loud at certain points - a young man near me held his hands to his ears on several occasions. The small screen above the stage with the supertitles changed, mysteriously enough, from Danish to English, and there were suspiciously long pauses now and then. When, after the performance, I got the chance to study the programme, which contained the entire text, I realised that sections of the text had not appeared on the screen at all. And that was a shame.

Despite these few details, this theatre performance really is a fantastic piece of art, one that provokes, makes one think and works successfully simply as a narrative. A rare occurrence, a pearl, a unique experience.

Translated by John Irons